CARNAPIAN DEFLATIONISM IN METAONTOLOGY: DRAWING THE LIMITS OF WHAT CAN BE ACHIEVED BY THE INTERNAL/EXTERNAL DISTINCTION

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Abstract

Attempts to deflate first-order ontological debates have become commonplace in recent metametaphysics. Many are traceable back to Carnap's distinction between internal and external existence-questions, where the former are meaningful and the latter are meaningless. In this thesis I attempt three things. First, I propose a reading of Carnap's original distinction that is plausible, modest and intuitive, and I raise the worry that despite its plausibility it cannot do any deflationary work in metaontology. Second, I examine Amie Thomasson's recent attempt to develop Carnap's distinction into a global deflationary view and I argue that this view leads to an unsatisfactory form of inclusive realism that makes the notion of existence so trivial that metaontological questions can easily re-arise within it. Finally, I propose a form of modest deflationism that takes Carnap's internal/external distinction as a starting point but is not based on the alleged meaninglessness of ontological questions but on their unanswerability.

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1 CHAPTER I: WHAT IS DEFLATIONISM IN METAONTOLOGY?

1.1 INTRODUCTION

This thesis is about answering existence-questions. More precisely: it is about how to *avoid* answering them if possible. By existence-questions I mean questions of the sort 'Do Fs exist?' where F is some sortal and the question is understood as metaphysical rather than empirical. For instance, we might ask ourselves whether there are numbers, properties, propositions, moral facts, qualia, possible worlds, aesthetic properties, fictional characters, institutions, ordinary objects, events, mereological sums, and many more. As we shall see, many contemporary metaphysicians are deeply sceptical of such questions; surely, they say, when people spend decades exchanging arguments back and forth over whether there really is a table in that region of space that contains simples arranged tablewise, or whether there really are numbers (when it is uncontroversial that 2+2=4 or that I have ten fingers), or whether there really is an object that is half my pinkie and half Wittgenstein's nose – well, when this happens, perhaps something's gone wrong. All deflationary views agree on this, but, as we shall see, they diagnose the problem in different ways, and accordingly they propose different solutions for it.

The overwhelming majority (although not all) of those who want to deflate ontological debates take their inspiration from Carnap's seminal 1950 paper, 'Empiricism, Semantics and Ontology', in which he argued that all existence-questions are either easily answerable or meaningless. In this thesis I shall do three main things. First, I will offer an interpretation and a critique of Carnap's deflationism (Chapter II). Then, I will address a formulation of contemporary

deflationism that agrees with me on my interpretation of Carnap and attempts to apply it globally, to all ontological debates, while avoiding my worry (Chapter III). Finally, I will put forward a weaker form of deflationism that also takes Carnap as a starting point but does not eliminate the possibility of substantive investigation into ontological questions (Chapter IV).

The aim of this chapter is largely expository. I start by introducing metaontology together with the currently mainstream, non-deflationary 'Quinean' approach to it. I then sketch a very brief conceptual map of the main deflationist proposals, to give the reader an idea of the main reasons for, and strategies in support of, deflationism in metaontology.

1.2 METANTOLOGY AND THE QUINEAN APPROACH

Ontology is the study of what there is. Ideally, an ontological theory would give us a complete list of all the things that exist. Of course, ontologists are not in the business of making inventories; rather, what they want to do is to discover what *kinds* of things exist. So a more precise formulation would be that ontology is concerned with uncovering the fundamental structure of the world; 'carving nature at its joints' (Sider 2011, 1). It means to deliver a list of the general categories of things that exist, together with a characterisation of each of these categories.

Metaontology is the second-order discipline whose subject matter is ontology. In a paper that coined the term, Peter van Inwagen outlined two aims of metaontology: first, we need to clarify what we mean when we ask what is there; and second, we need to find the correct methodology for answering this question (van Inwagen 1998; see also Berto and Plebani 2015, 2). In the rest of this paper I will also assume this understanding of metaontology carried out qua self-standing discipline.

Nowadays, by far the most common approach to answering ontological question is the so-called Quinean form of metaontology, which I shall also call, following Thomasson (2015) 'hard', or occasionally 'substantive' metaontology when contrasting it with deflationism, for reasons that will shortly become apparent. Here is a brief presentation of it.[1]

On the Quinean view, to discover what there is, we first need the concept of a *best theory*. Substantively, it is a matter for debate what exactly this theory would look like. Quine took the content of the best theory to be determined exclusively by what the natural sciences study, but this narrow kind of naturalism is not required for Quinean ontology. David Lewis, a textbook example of Quinean metaontology, argued that we should accept the existence of concrete possible worlds (a non-naturalistic kind of entity if there ever was one) because doing so would improve our best 'total theory, the whole of what we take to be true' (Lewis 1986, 4). Good-making features for a theory include the so-called theoretical virtues, including explanatory and predictive power, parsimony, simplicity or unity.

Quine proposed that in order to answer existence question we should use a *criterion of ontological commitment*. This criterion can be spelled out as follows: we take our best theory of the world, translate it into canonical notation (first-order logic, for Quine), and look at the values of the variables that the theory quantifies over (Quine 1948/1953, 33). These values are what needs to exist for the theory to be true. Since that is our *best* theory, we have good reason to believe that the things it quantifies over really do exist.[2] This enables Quinean ontologists, generally, to use indispensability arguments in support of their ontological assertions. Roughly, indispensability

[1] With the caveat that 'Quinean' ontology as it currently stands does not perfectly overlap with Quine's historical views. See Price 2009 for an interpretation of Quine according to which he is in agreement with Carnap, of all people, regarding the aims and results of ontology.
[2] The classic statements of the Quinean approach are in Quine (1948/1953) and (1951/1953).

arguments have the following form: quantification over Fs is indispensable in our best theory, therefore, Fs exist (Eklund 2006, 318).[3] Of course, one may attempt to paraphrase away entities that they do not want in their ontology. Translation into canonical notation is not merely a mechanical procedure of rendering natural language into formal or semi-formal language, but requires a certain amount of decision-making over what should be kept and what should be paraphrased away. For instance (borrowing the famous example from Lewis and Lewis 1970), 'There is a hole in the cheese' may be translated either as '∃x(x is a hole in the cheese)', which commits us to the existence of holes, or 'The cheese is perforated', which commits us to no such objects. In fact, the process of translation and the process of formulating the best theory are often not separate stages in practice, but feed into each other: the reason why we might prefer a translation of some piece of some apparently F-committed natural language which eliminates commitment to Fs might be because it gives us a theory which is more economical, or we might prefer a translation which preserves Fs because the resulting theory is more explanatory, and so on. Horgan (1993, 695) summarises very well the general attitude:

> … an adequate metaphysical theory – like an adequate scientific theory – should itself be systematic and general, and should keep to a minimum the unexplained facts that it posits. In particular, a good metaphysical or scientific theory should avoid positing a plethora of quite specific, disconnected sui generis, compositional facts.

So, in terms of methodology, Quinean metaontology holds that ontological questions are to be answered not merely by conceptual analysis or by looking at how we use language, but by conducting substantive debate in metaphysics. Ontological inquiry is a serious enterprise, much like scientific research, and it is expected to tell us what really exists.

[3] A classic statement of the Quine–Putnam indispensability argument for numbers is in Putnam (1970).

As a preview of what we will see in the next few chapters, here is a simplified illustration of the differences between hard and deflationary ontology. Suppose we're trying to answer the Special Composition Question, i.e., under what conditions, if at all, do objects compose something? Nihilists say never; there are not even any common-sense objects like tables or chairs, only simples (things with no proper parts) arranged table- or chair- or generally object-wise.[4] Universalists say always; not only do tables exist, but so do any arbitrary combinations of objects, like the fusion of my pinkie and Wittgenstein's nose.[5] Restrictivists hold an intermediate position, according to which there are some combinations that constitute objects, like tables, but no arbitrary fusions.[6] All the parties will not be concerned merely with how we speak or how our conceptual schemata look in order to decide whether there are tables. Plausibly, everyone in this debate accepts that the way we ordinarily conceptualise the world is committed to an ontology of tables; but this does not necessarily mean there are tables.

The arguments brought by all sides in support of their theses will be substantive and highly non-trivial.[7] Here are two stock arguments from nihilists against ordinary objects. Nihilists might say that 'to be real is to have causal powers' (Merricks 2001, 81) and tables do no causal work that simples arranged tablewise do not already do, so it is needless to postulate them as part of the ontological structure of reality. Or they might argue that accepting ordinary objects leads to other kinds of problems. For example, ordinary objects are constituted by matter – a statue is constituted by the clay it was made out of. The statue and the clay are intuitively different objects, because

[4] Examples of nihilists include van Inwagen (1990), Merricks (2001), Rosen and Dorr (2002), and Sider (2013) (though note that van Inwagen and Merricks do accept the existence of composite objects when they constitute an organism).
[5] Universalists include Lewis (1991) and van Cleve (1986).
[6] Some restrictivists are Markosian (1998), Smith (2005) and Kriegel (2008). The term 'restrictivist' is from Kriegel (2013).
[7] See Thomasson (2006) for a survey and criticism of some of the more common arguments, including the two I mention below.

they have different modal profiles. But then it would appear that there are two co-located objects. Isn't it neater to avoid this apparent problem by simply doing away with objects altogether?[8] (My aim here is not to present an exhaustive list of arguments for any of the positions, but to give an idea of what these arguments are like, and what I mean by *substantive* metaontology.)

Alternatively or in addition, all parties might appeal to theoretical virtues – I also count this under 'substantive metaphysics'. The nihilist might say that, unlike others, she explains the data – our empirical observations of the world around us – in a more parsimonious manner, because she postulates fewer entities, the restrictivist – that her view is more in line with common sense, which is committed to ordinary objects but not arbitrary combinations, and the universalist that her theory is more uniform than the others, since it preserves ordinary objects without making what she perceives to be arbitrary distinctions between combinations that are objects and combinations that aren't. And so on. All this is not empirical investigation, but it is clearly modeled on the methodology used by science. The questions are '"epistemically metaphysical": they resist direct empirical methods but are nevertheless not answerable by conceptual analysis' (Sider 2011, 222).

Deflationists are by no means unified in their approach to these questions but they uniformly refuse to engage in the kind of substantive argumentation I briefly described above. Roughly, deflationists will either reject the questions themselves as misguided if they presuppose they must be answered using substantive investigation, or will look at ordinary language and conclude directly from it, without further arguments, that we ought to believe in tables (or numbers, or properties, or…).

[8] See e.g., Merricks (2001) for a rejection of co-located objects, as well as van Inwagen (1990, 125-7).

1.3 VARIETIES OF DEFLATIONISM

In this section I will present a brief, and non-exhaustive, survey of some recent deflationary proposals.[9] This is more in order to give the reader an idea of what options are available, rather than to defend or reject any particular views. Of the views below, I shall explicitly engage with Thomasson's easy ontology (Chapter III), and to a lesser extent Yablo's fictionalism (Chapter IV), the reason for this being the reading of Carnap that I propose in the next chapter. There are two directions in which one can take that reading: a strong form of deflationism, and a weaker one. Thomasson takes the strong option, which I reject, and I will be arguing for the weaker view, which is closer to (but not identical) to Yablo's position.

1. *Antirealism*. There is no fact of the matter about whether or not there are Fs, and thus it is pointless to ask existence-questions about Fs. For instance, Chalmers (2009) claims that ontological existence assertions, when they purport to be independent of a framework, lack determinate truth-conditional content. Another version of antirealism is defended by Yablo (2009), who argues that we can easily explain why we evaluate certainly apparently ontologically committed sentences as true or false without invoking their existential commitments in the explanation. Since he assumes 'F' refers iff it makes some distinct semantic contribution to the truth-value of the sentences it appears in, he ends up concluding that there is nothing to determine whether the terms in question refer.

2. *Quantifier variance*/*semanticism*. Participants in ontological debates are not really contradicting each other, because each party has their own 'language' where they assign different meanings to the key terms that they are debating about ('object' or 'exist'). We are dealing with a

[9] For similar surveys see Bennett (2009, 39-40) and Thomasson (2015, chapter 4).

purely verbal/shallow dispute when all parties hold views that come out true in their own languages; for example, it is true in the nihilist's language that there are no composite objects, and it is true in the universalist's language that there are many composite objects, but this is because they mean different things by 'object'. However, each party can charitably interpret the other party's disputed sentences, starting from claims they both agree on and using 'translation principles'. A nihilist can start from the undisputed claim 'there are simples' and use the translation principle 'in the universalist's language, any combination of simples makes an object' to arrive at the sentence 'in the universalist's language there are many objects', which is true in the nihilist's own language. When controversial statements can be translated in this way, the disagreement is dissolved. Quantifier variantists add the claim that there is no privileged meaning of the quantifier or terms like 'object'; there can be many such meanings, each of which describes the world equally well.[10]

3. *Epistemicism.* There are determinate answers to existence-questions. However, certain debates have reached a stalemate. The evidence is ambiguous, and the fact that all parties in the debate attempt to preserve the same pretheoretical intuitions drives them all to minimise the differences between them to such an extent, that given the evidence we have it is extremely difficult to decide either way. This view has been defended by Bennett (2009). Kriegel (2013) has similarly argued that the criteria usually employed in evaluating competing metaphysical views (empirical adequacy, fit with intuitions and possession of theoretical virtues) fail to decisively support any one position in many ontological debates.

[10] See Hirsch 2002a, 2002b, 2007, 2009 and 2011 for a realist version, according to which what exists is not determined by the languages we use. See Putnam 1987 and 1990 for a more antirealist view, according to which quantifier variance entails relativism, i.e., ontological questions can only be answered from within a conceptual scheme and there are no objects existing independently of it.

4. *Obviousness*. It is not worth having debates about whether Fs exist because the answer is obvious: of course they exist. As a global view, it has recently been defended by Amie Thomasson (2015). More localised approaches based on the same basic idea have been defended by the so-called 'neo-Fregeans' in the philosophy of mathematics,[11] by Stephen Schiffer (1996, 1998, 2003) in his defense of 'pleonastic' abstract objects,[12] and by Thomasson herself with respect to ordinary objects.[13] I will devote extensive discussion to Thomasson's view in Chapter III, but until then suffice it to say that according to this kind of view, we are able to infer the existence of Fs via trivial inferences from uncontroversial truths.

5. *Irrelevance*. All parties can agree on certain uncontroversial truths. These truths hold whether or not there are Fs. For fictionalism, what is primary are the truths stateable in terms of F-talk, and the Fs are seen as mere 'representational aids' that facilitate the communication of these truths, e.g., speaking of numbers enables us to make generalisations about mathematics and state mathematical sentences in a more concise manner, but the fact that we speak about numbers does not commit us to adding anything in our inventory of things that exist.[14] I will discuss fictionalism in more detail in Chapter IV.

Finally, three quick points on what I believe the most attractive form of deflationism should look like.

First, it should avoid being antirealist (i.e., holding that there is not fact of the matter about whether there are Fs). I think we should only resort to this very revisionary position if all other options have failed. Besides, I must confess I cannot make much sense of the notion of there being

[11] See Hale and Wright (2001) and (2009), Hale (2010) and Wright (1983).
[12] See Chapter III, fn. 27 for a brief discussion.
[13] See Thomasson (2007).
[14] See Yablo (1998), (2000), (2001), (2005) and (2007).

'no fact of the matter' about whether, say, there exist numbers. It seems to me that many of those who write as if it is indeterminate whether there are Fs or not actually mean to claim something in the vicinity of that – that our ontological claims have indeterminable (rather than indeterminate) truth-value, either because we have no evidence about what exists, or because they are true or false relative to some conceptual schema rather than simpliciter. But this is not the same as saying that at the ontological level it is not the case either that Fs exist or that they don't.

Second, it should not, as far as possible, resolve the debates by saying that different ontological claims are true in a language-relative sense and none of these languages are more correct than others. Either this will amount to avoiding answering the question of why we should stop debating, rather than explaining why we should, if it just proclaims that everyone is right; or, if it does give some principled reason why everyone is right, it is not true deflationism, since we need to do substantive metaphysics to arrive to the conclusion that the world is such that it makes true different languages.[15]

Finally, a good form of deflationism should be global; i.e., give us a principled methodology for answering all ontological questions, or, lacking that, a methodology to help us tell, for any ontological question, whether it is worth undertaking or not. This is another problem for the quantifier variance views, since as Hirsch himself (2009, 253) admits, it does not really work to dissolve disputes about abstract objects. Everyone in the Special Composition debate agrees that there are simples, and once this agreement is in place it is not implausible that they will come up with translation principles for each other's languages, but it is doubtful that Platonists and nominalists about numbers or properties find such starting points to agree about.

[15] See Sider (2009, 391-6) and (2011, 215-24) for criticism along these lines.

This being said, let's see what Carnap has to say about deflating ontology, and how we can make use of his views.

2 CHAPTER II: CARNAP AND HOW TO BE A CARNAPIAN

2.1 CARNAP'S INTERNAL/EXTERNAL DISTICTION

To make it easier on the reader to follow Carnap's presentation, I shall start by drawing a distinction (which Carnap himself does not draw) between *particular* and *general* existence-questions. [16] Particular existence-questions are not generally philosophical: they ask whether there are so-and-so's of a certain kind, i.e., Are there any books on the table? Are there prime numbers greater than 10000? General existence-questions concern the so-and-so's as a whole category and are normally what ontologists inquire about; i.e., Are there numbers? Does the external world exist, where the external world is the totality of things?

The core of Carnapian deflationism is the distinction between internal and external questions (henceforth, I/E). Internal and external to what? Carnap starts by introducing the idea of a linguistic framework:

> If someone wishes to speak in his language about a new kind of entities, he has to introduce a system of new ways of speaking, subject to new rules; we shall call this procedure the construction of a linguistic framework for the new entities in question. (Carnap 1950/1956, 206)

A linguistic framework consists in a system of rules for the use of a term: 'rules for forming statements and for testing, accepting or rejecting them' (1950/1956, 208). Once we have a

[16] Although Quine does draw a distinction between 'category' and 'subclass' questions, which is virtually the same as the one I'm proposing: see Quine (1951, 68). I will come back to this in 2.3.

linguistic framework which allows us to speak about Fs, we are able to make statements and ask questions using the term 'F'. Among these questions are existence-questions: 'Are there Fs?'

It is possible to read a question of this kind in three ways: (a) internal; (b) factual-external; (c) pragmatic-external.[17] Internal questions are asked 'within the framework', i.e., assume the rules of use for some term as defined by the framework; while external questions concern the existence of the 'system of entities as a whole'. Carnap discusses several cases of disputed entities, but I shall only focus on numbers to illustrate how the distinction works.

When we introduce a number-framework we specify rules which tell us in what circumstances we are licensed to apply the term 'number'. Here is Carnap's proposal for defining the rules of use for 'number' – it can be used in the following cases:

> (1) numerals like "five" and sentence forms like "there are five books on the table"; (2) the general term "number" for the new entities, and sentence forms like "five is a number"; (3) expressions for properties of numbers (e.g. "odd," "prime"), relations (e.g., "greater than") and functions (e.g. "plus"), and sentence forms like "two plus three is five"; (4) numerical variables ("m," "n," etc.) and quantifiers for universal sentences ("for every n . . .) and existential sentences ("there is an n such that . . .") with the customary deductive rules. (1950/1956, 208)

We can ask either particular or general questions about numbers. Particular questions are always internal, because they ask whether there are certain types of numbers, which assumes that the term 'number' applies e.g., 'Is there a prime number greater than a hundred?'. These are matters of mathematics rather than philosophy, and are answerable by logical analysis based on the rules we have introduced when we came up with the number-framework.

[17] This is not exactly how Carnap lays out his distinction; he talks only about internal/external, and imagines pragmatic external questions to be charitable interpretations of factual-external questions. I am following common readings of Carnap; the terminology 'factual-external' and 'pragmatic-external' is from Eklund (2009).

Let's focus instead on the ontological question: 'Are there numbers?'. The internal reading of this question is: 'Assuming a number-framework, are there numbers?'. The answer is a trivial 'yes'; it follows from the rules of the framework. To make it clearer, we can derive this answer from the rules Carnap numbered (1) and (2) above. Rule (1) allows us to introduce numeral-words to state truths about the world, e.g., that I have ten fingers. Rule (2) allows us to introduce the general term 'number' to refer to the entities designated within the framework by the numerals introduced in (1); i.e., we can say that 'Ten is a number'. The latter entails that there is a number, which in turn entails that numbers exist. Clearly, internal existence-questions are not worth asking and indeed this is not what philosophers normally mean when they ask existence-questions (Carnap 1950/1065, 209).

We can also read the question externally: 'a question prior to the acceptance of the new framework […] a question of the ontological status of numbers; the question whether or not numbers have a certain metaphysical characteristic called reality' (ibid.). Platonists will answer yes, nominalists will answer no. But what does it mean to say that there *really are* numbers? It is to say that for numbers to exist there needs to be something more than for us to be able to truly say 'there is a number' in virtue of the rules we have introduced when we created the term 'number'. Well, and what in the world would that 'something more' be, since by definition it is not included in the meaning of the term? Construed as a factual question, 'Are there numbers?' read externally is meaningless. This is because if we ask whether there are numbers independently of the number-framework, we must stop assuming the rules of use for the term 'number' as specified by the number-framework. But a term without rules of use is meaningless, hence any questions it appears in are meaningless.

Nevertheless, we can still offer a charitable interpretation of what the nominalist and the Platonist are in the business of doing when they debate the existence of numbers. What they are doing is asking 'a practical question […] whether or not to accept and use the forms of expression in the framework in question' (ibid.). But an affirmative answer to this question will not entitle us to *believe* that there are numbers, or, indeed, tell us anything about what exists independently of the framework.

To recap: general existence questions about some entity F – because it is these that I shall be concerned with in this thesis – can be read either as internal, factual-external, or pragmatic-external. If internal, they are answerable easily and thus not worth asking. If factual-external, they are meaningless and hence unanswerable, so not worth asking. If pragmatic-external, they are meaningful and answerable, but they are not in the business of telling us what there is. So, all in all, we should abandon doing ontology, and content ourselves with finding the simplest, neatest, most fruitful, etc. way of speaking about the world, while preserving a healthily cynical attitude about what this way of speaking tells us about what *really* exists.

2.2 INTERPRETING CARNAP: A MODEST READING OF I/E

The backbone of Carnap's deflationary proposal is the I/E distinction. From now on I will speak, following Thomasson, of 'application-conditions' for relevant terms, using the concept interchangeably with that of a linguistic framework. By application-conditions, Thomasson means 'certain basic rules of use that are among those that are meaning-constituting for the term' (Thomasson 2015, 89). In the case of sortals, they are the rules that establish the conditions under which the term either succeeds or fails in referring, or in which it is appropriate either to apply or to withdraw the term (Thomasson 2015, 90). For example, the application-conditions for 'table'

include, in our language, that the term can be appropriately used with its literal meaning when there is a surface standing on three or more legs that it is suitable for eating off of; it should not be used when there is a surface made for sitting.[18] So an internal question about Fs is one which presupposes the application-conditions for 'F', and an external question is one where the application-conditions for 'F' are unknown, unspecified, or underspecified.

I/E was seen as problematic for a long time, because of being associated both with verificationism (which Carnap was a supporter of), and because early on Quine assimilated it to the analytic/synthetic distinction (Quine 1951, 71), which he famously rejected (see Quine 1951/1953). Regarding verificationism, it is tempting to attribute Carnap's rejection of factual-external questions to an underlying commitment to the Verification Principle – i.e., because F-frameworks are no more than rules for use for 'F' which tell us in what conditions F-statements are verified, and asking F-questions externally amounts to giving up the guarantee that F-claims are verified. Regarding analytic/synthetic, it is Quine who is responsible for the assimilation, because he argued (1951, 71) that the reason why 'statements commonly thought as ontological' (general external, in my terminology) are answerable so easily is because external claims are true in virtue of meaning, and hence 'proper matters of contention only in the form of linguistic proposals'. And the contrast between 'ontological statements' (i.e., general external statements) and 'empirical existence statements' (i.e., general internal statements) such as 'There are black swans' appears to overlap perfectly with analytic/synthetic, since for the latter we need to carry out empirical investigation.

[18] It is not required that application-conditions be fully and determinately stateable by all competent speakers – it is enough that speakers know how to use them (much like most of us can speak our native languages correctly without necessarily being able to articulate the underlying grammar rules). They needn't take the form of necessary and sufficient conditions, and can be revised in response to the world and in deference to experts. See Thomasson (2015, 91).

There is a simple way of interpreting I/E that avoids such worries. I propose reading Carnap as simply stipulating that 'internal' means 'asked while presupposing fully specified application-conditions for the relevant terms', and 'external' means 'asked using a term whose application-conditions are un- or underspecified'.[19] This reading assumes that there is no philosophical principle more fundamental than I/E, whether it be verificationism or the analytic/synthetic distinction or anything else, of which I/E is derivative (if I/E happens to overlap with analytic/synthetic, that will be neither here nor there). In other words, internal and external existence-questions are just defined as either presupposing or not presupposing, respectively, fully specified application-conditions for the relevant sortals.[20]

This reading is the best possible option for the Carnapian deflationist. (It is not intended as a piece of Carnapian exegesis.) As I said above, it doesn't presuppose any prior assumptions about metaphysics or language. Moreoever, it is modest and utterly uncontroversial. Thomasson considers the question 'Are there huasadoes?'. Since this is a made up term, we don't know what a huasado could possibly be, and so we have no way of answering either 'yes' or 'no'. Clearly, external questions are indeed meaningless or, if this is too strong, unanswerable. If anything, the distinction is so uncontroversial as to be trivial.

Before I move on, I shall clarify exactly what it means for internal questions to be answerable 'easily'. This is both in order to support the plausibility of the distinction, and to build a foundation for my criticism of it. First of all, I want to prevent (or, for those convinced by Quine's

[19] For a similar reading see Thomasson (2015, 39). Similarly, Eklund (2009, 134-5) writes that taking Carnap's I/E suggestion on board does not amount to anything more controversial than that there are different possible English-like languages, one of which is such that a disputed ontological claim there comes out true, while in the other other it comes out false – we don't need to say that the claim is analytic in either language.

[20] Again, 'fully specified' doesn't mean 'fully stateable by competent speakers', but rather that for any possible circumstances 'F' either applies in those circumstances or doesn't.

criticism, reject) the misconception that internal questions, whether particular or general, are answerable trivially or always in the affirmative or indeed answerable in virtue of the application-conditions for 'F' *alone*. One clear case of a general internal question that meets all these criteria is

(W) Are there witches?

Clearly, this is an internal question by Carnap's lights; it is meaningful, so not factual-external, and it is not pragmatic-external, since we know the answer to this question – it is *no* – and this *no* straightforwardly means that there really are no witches, not that a witchless linguistic framework is pragmatically preferable to one which allows witches. But, in order to answer this kind of internal question it is not enough to know the meaning of the term 'witch'; we have to conduct substantive investigation – actually look for evidence on whether there are women who can perform magic.

The bottom line is that we need to qualify the claim that internal-questions qua internal are answered 'easily'. We should say that an internal question of the form 'Are there Fs?' is answerable with a 'yes' iff two conditions obtain: (i) the linguistic framework we're in provides rules of use for 'F' regarding the circumstances in which it applies (so far this is just the definition of 'internal') and (ii) these circumstances actually obtain. The first conjunct is always trivially satisfied by the meaningfulness of the term 'F' *but* we also need the second conjunct; and whether or not the second conjunct is satisfied is no trivial matter, much less true in virtue of meaning/ true by stipulation/ analytic/ any other notion in the vicinity. Sometimes, as in the case of witches, (ii) is not satisfied.

An obvious objection at this point is that my discussion about witches doesn't have any bearing on the case of numbers and other abstracta, or even composite objects. The reason why we need to actually look at the world when we inquire about witches, the objection goes, is simply because witches are empirical entities; the reason is not anything related to the nature of internal questions themselves.

It is tempting to say that, but I don't believe that's what's really going on here. The reason why in the case of (W) we need to look at the world is not just because witches are empirical things, but rather because of the possibility that when we introduce a new term in our language, we can either be mistaken about whether its application-conditions are actually met, or we can simply introduce it with application-conditions that we know are not met. It does seem more likely that the possibility that application-conditions are not met holds for empirical matters of fact rather than non-empirical ones, but it is far from obvious that *empirical/non-empirical* maps exactly onto *needs looking into the world/doesn't*. That would presuppose that the world only consists of empirical matters, which is controversial and begs the question in favour of the deflationary Carnapian and against the hard ontology-friendly Platonists. It is true that Carnap says that the internal question 'Are there numbers?' is answerable trivially, but I think that's because he has in mind an idealised situation where a kind of Platonic lawgiver has just introduced the term 'number' by stipulating that it applies only in circumstances that she knows obtain, so it is clear to her that the application-conditions for 'number' are met.

2.3 THE CHALLENGE FOR CARNAPIAN DEFLATIONISM

In the previous section I argued that I/E is an uncontroversial, intuitive distinction, that external questions are indeed meaningless, and that internal questions are not answerable in virtue

of meaning alone. It is the last part I want to focus on. The correct way to criticise I/E as a starting point for deflationism is not to question it as such, but to question whether ontological questions are external as defined by Carnap.

I'm not saying Carnapians are completely wrong when they assimilate ontological questions to external ones; there can be such questions. We can imagine a confused metaontologist asking herself: 'I know we use 'number' with a specific meaning in ordinary English and in the ontology room, but what if this meaning is wrong? What would be the meaning we should give the word "number", such that all our ontological assertions about numbers made using the term in that sense will come out true?'. I have to agree with the Carnapians that this person's question is unanswerable. However, Carnapians move too quickly when they assume all ontological questions are like this. Thomasson (2015, 40) takes it for granted that all ontological questions are like huassado questions. Eklund (2009, 133) is happy to simply state: 'we can imagine two disputants who announce that they are not concerned with what comes out true in English […] and who further announce that they are not concerned with a pragmatic question of how we should speak. […] If it is hard to wrap one's mind around what this would amount to, that is because these disputants would be seriously confused' – and then move on without explaining why.

This is way too quick – I don't see why we should simply assume that in asking whether Fs really exist we must give up all application-conditions for 'F', like the confused ontologist above, rather than keep F's meaning and ask of that: are there *really* any Fs?'. What I propose, that is, is to frame ontological questions as internal questions – internal to the most inclusive framework, that includes everything that exists. So an ontological question about numbers would sound like: 'Of all the things that exist, do some of them meet the application-conditions we associate with the term *number*?'

I argued in the previous section that there can be a gap between (i) and (ii) and that it is not tied only to some internal questions, so it is reasonable to conclude that the possibility applies to internal questions as a category.[21] However, if it is a fact about all internal questions, qua internal, that they require substantive investigation into whether the application-conditions for the relevant sortal obtain, then the possibility of hard ontology is reintroduced. Discovering whether there are numbers and tables won't require empirical investigation like discovering whether there used to be dinosaurs, but it will still require something more than just looking at language. It will require finding out whether there is a *thing* that meets the application-conditions. That is hard, nontrivial, non-easy metaphysics, doable within internal questions.

Before I go on, I want to mention that an objection similar to mine was made early on by Quine, in 'On Carnap's views on ontology'. He argued that I/E was derivative of a more basic distinction, that between category and subclass questions (1951, 68) – the two correspond to what I called particular and general. And he further argued that category questions can be easily rephrased as subclass questions (1951, 69), which is similar to my point that so-called 'external' questions about Fs can be rephrased, ultimately, as questions internal to the most inclusive framework. However, Quine went in a different direction. He argued that because we can so easily rephrase category questions into subclass questions, the distinction must not be a very significant one. And Quine thought this dealt a blow to I/E because I/E depends for its existence on category/subclass. I have to say that I don't understand the latter claim, because as Quine himself notes, and as we have seen, category/subclass (or what I called particular/general) actually cuts across I/E. I hope it is clear from my discussion above that the two distinctions are fairly orthogonal

[21] As an added bonus, if we allow the possibility of a gap between application-conditions and their being met, we avoid the dreaded identification of internal statements with analytic ones.

to each other. If it is not the case that I/E is derivative from category/subclass, then the latter can be as bad a distinction as there can be; it will not affect the former in the least.

An obvious objection arises now. Suppose I am right that when we ask the ontological question 'Do numbers exist?' what we mean is something like:

> (N) Is it the case, given that (i) 'number' comes with such-and-such application-conditions, that (ii) these application-conditions are met by something?

There is space for the Carnapian to argue that this so-called internal question is meaningless because the framework with respect to which general ontological questions about numbers are internal is far from clear. What are the application-conditions for 'thing' in this unrestricted sense? Is the most inclusive framework even coherent?

In Chapter IV I shall argue that 'thing' in this unrestricted sense does indeed have underspecified application-conditions, but this does not preclude us having a clear enough understanding of the term for ontological questions to not be meaningless. That supports, in my opinion, a form of deflationism that is weaker than Carnap's. To anticipate: I believe (N) above is meaningful, but possibly unanswerable. However, I think it is best to not address the issue straight away. Whether or not we can make sense of 'thing' in the unrestricted sense is an issue so close to the main question of whether we can have meaningful ontological questions that are not trivially answerable, that it is very difficult for any answer to it to not be theory-laden – because it lies so close to the very core of the matter being debated – and therefore somewhat circular, on either side.

So, before I do that, I will look at an attempt to turn I/E into a form of metaontology that tries to do away with the gap between (i) and (ii) that I described above. This is Amie Thomasson's neo-Carnapian view, which she calls 'easy ontology'. She starts by assuming, like Carnap, that ontological questions asked in a factual-external vein are meaningless, and develops her view from there. I will show that this position is not workable, and that ontological questions can rearise even if we presuppose it. I will then be in a better position to argue for my own proposal, which will be a weaker way to make use of I/E.

3 CHAPTER III: DEFLATING ONTOLOGY THROUGH PERMISSIVENESS

3.1 EASY ONTOLOGY AND SIMPLE REALISM

In her 2015 book, as well as a series of papers,[22] Amie Thomasson has defended a deflationary approach to ontological questions that is Carnapian, insofar as she recommends approaching such questions via conceptual analysis. What is particularly attractive about her view is that it aims to establish a form of realism about the entities in question: once we have some F-framework, the existence of Fs follows easily from the framework if the concept applies, and we are entitled to say that Fs really exist, not merely that they exist according to the framework. In this chapter I will argue, however, that easy ontology is unsuccessful in securing this form of realism, and at most it can yield a very inclusive form of realism that makes existence into a trivial notion. The consequences of that, as well as an alternative form of deflationism that follows from them, will be explored in the next chapter.

Thomasson starts by proposing a deflationary criterion for existence, where by 'deflationism' she means the following: a theory is deflationary of a concept C if it denies that the function of C is to 'attempt to refer to a property we can track and investigate' and instead holds that said concept has a different function; by explicating this function, we will be able to gain an understanding of the concept (2015, 86-7). Thomasson explicates the function of 'exists' as one of correcting misconceptions or mistaken assumptions about whether certain terms do or do not refer

[22] See also her (2016), (2009) and (2008). Her (2015) is the fullest treatment of the conceptual analysis approach to deflationism, so it is the one I will be engaging with.

(2015, 87-8). She notes that we seldom make existence or nonexistence claims simpliciter in ordinary conversation, except in response to mistaken beliefs of other speakers; e.g., we might say that monsters don't exist to calm down a scared child, or that black swans exist to correct someone's misconception that all swans are white. That is, according to Thomasson, the function of 'exist' is simply to get clear on whether some term or other refers.[23] Accordingly, she proposes the following criterion for existence (2015, 86):

(E) Fs exist iff the application conditions associated with 'F' (at this world) are fulfilled.

Contrast non-deflationary approaches, where having a concept 'F' is not sufficient to guarantee the existence of F, and we need further substantive metaphysics to establish that Fs exist, i.e., that there is a *thing* such that the concept 'F' applies to it. Moreover, non-deflationists will require that the things to which the concept applies should satisfy certain substantive 'criteria of existence' Mind-independence and causal potency are mentioned several times by Thomasson on behalf of the hard ontologist (2015, 82; 115-6).

It is important to get clear on what (E) actually means. It does seem obvious that if some term applies, then the referent of that term exists. But how do we understand the right-hand side of (E) – what does it mean for a term to apply? Surely it cannot mean that the application-conditions associated with 'F' are fulfilled by some*thing*, because that would require us to have a concept of what it is for there to be a thing which is prior to our understanding of (E), and thus (E) would either end in infinite regress, if we were to understand the concept of being a thing in a deflationary way, or would collapse into some non-deflationary view of existence, if we were to understand it independently of (E). Thomasson does not make it extremely clear, but I think the

[23] There is an assumption in the background that terms used in fictional discourse don't refer. See Thomasson (1999).

only way we can spell out (E) that does not lead to either horn of this dilemma is to think of application-conditions as being satisfied by the existence of true propositions involving 'F'. Correspondingly, we should think of application-conditions for 'F' as being rules that systematically tell us which truths it is appropriate to state in terms of 'F'. For instance, one of the application-rules for 'table' (when used literally), which is stipulated when the term is introduced, is that 'there is a table' can always be used to state the same proposition as does 'there are particles arranged tablewise'. Or, one of the application-rules for 'number' allows us to restate counting-statements by systematically replacing 'there are n things' with 'the number of things is n'.

Moving on, two consequences follow from (E): metaontological deflationism, and first-order realism. Thomasson draws a methodological distinction between (her own) 'simple' and (hard) 'explanatory' realism. The explanatory realist is normally motivated by 'the claim that "positing" the relevant entities provides some "explanatory" benefit', e.g., numbers 'help us explain our number talk, its objectivity, its usefulness in science, and the like'. In contrast, the simple realist accepts Fs but 'does not argue for them by suggesting that they are "posits" that […] explain phenomena; instead, she accepts them just on the basis of the trivial arguments' (2015, 155-6).[24] In a nutshell, on a simple realist view, 'given that 'x' applies, we infer that x exists (we don't presuppose it in determining whether the application conditions for 'x' are fulfilled)' (2015, 123).

Simple realism is metaontologically deflationary, but Thomasson emphasises that the entities we reach via this methodology are not themselves 'deflated' (2015, 145). Simple and

[24] Cf. Hale (2010, 406): 'If […] there are true statements incorporating expressions functioning as singular terms, then there are objects of some corresponding kind. If the singular terms are such that, if they have reference at all, they refer to numbers, there are numbers.'

explanatory realism make exactly the same first-order claims: there are Fs. Simple realists do not believe that all there is for there to be an F is for there to be some truths. If there are F-truths, there are Fs that make these truths true. It is only that they use a simple principle for discovering the existence of Fs – 'if F-statements are true, then it must be the case that 'F' applies to something and therefore there is an F.' Thomasson refrains from giving any lists of features in virtue of which existing things qualify as existing (earlier I mentioned causal potency and mind-independence as existence criteria as features proposed by some hard ontologists). But it is important to note that on her view there is no room for saying that some things exist in a 'lesser' or 'thinner' (whatever this means) sense than others. There is a single sense of existence, which applies to all entities we get out of correct easy arguments (on which see below): tables exist, numbers exist, properties, marriages, thoughts, dogs and planets all exist, in the same way and to the same degree, despite the fact that they are different kinds of things.

Easy ontology uses 'easy arguments', trivial inferences starting from uncontroversial truths, made according to the rules of linguistic frameworks. Here are two applications (see Thomasson 2015, 129-132):

(T1) There are simples arranged tablewise in the kitchen.[25]

(T2) According to the table-framework, it is among the application-conditions for 'table' that the sentence 'There is a table at region R' is true when 'There are simples arranged tablewise at R' is true.

(T3) Therefore, by T1 and T3, there is a table in the kitchen.

[25] Read 'simples' as convenient shorthand for 'whatever fundamental stuff there is', since simples are controversial. And it might also be controversial that there's fundamental stuff, but let's go with the assumption that *something* fundamental exists, for reasons that will become clear in 3.3.

(T4) Therefore, there is a table.

(T5) Therefore, tables exist.

(N1) There are two bagels on the table.

(N2) According to the number-framework, it is among the application-conditions for 'number' that the sentence 'The number of objects is n' is true when 'There are n objects' is true.

(N3) By N1 and N2, the number of bagels is two.

(N4) Therefore, there is a number.

(N5) Therefore, numbers exist.

I will assume, in order to be charitable and make my objection as strong as possible, that easy arguments like the ones above are valid and sound. The rationale behind easy arguments is as follows: we presuppose (E), which according to the interpretation I proposed earlier states that application-conditions for 'F' are satisfied when there are *true* F-propositions. When running an easy argument on a particular entity – say, tables or numbers – we start from some uncontroversial truth that according to the rules of the framework we are in – the table- or the number-framework – can be restated as involving the problematic entities. Because the starting premise of the argument is true, so is its restatement, so the application-conditions are guaranteed to be met. Hence, there are tables or numbers.

3.2 HOW EASY ONTOLOGY DELIVERS COMPOSITE OBJECTS

In this section I will return to the Special Composition Question, and clarify where Thomasson stands in relation to the nihilists, the universalists, and the restrictivists. My aim is to

provide an illustration of how easy ontology works, and to pave the way for the criticism in 3.3. I do not intend to attack the way easy ontology delivers tables, but to *diagnose* what makes Thomasson a realist about tables – namely, her assumption that it is uncontroversial to all parties in the debate that simples exist. The end of section 3.3 will explain why this is a worry for easy ontology's attempt to support realism.

The nihilist, as I mentioned in the first chapter, believes that all there exists is simples; no further composite objects. The restrictivists and universalists (let's collectively call them 'believers', following Bennett 2009) believe there are composite objects. They do not claim there are tables in addition to the simples, as if they were extra objects we could pull away from the simples. But they also do not say that tables are identical to the simples, because then they would just be nihilists. Rather, believers hold that there is some 'nothing-over-and-above' relation holding between the simples and the table (the grounding or constitution relations could do this job).

It is important to distinguish between two levels on which nihilists and believers disagree. On the metaphysical level, nihilists believe that there are only simples, while believers are committed to composite objects neither identical nor additional to the simples but bearing some special relation to them. On the linguistic level, consider the following statement:

(T) There is a table in the kitchen.

Believers will say that (T) is literally true, in virtue of 'table' referring to the table, which is the object bearing the 'nothing-over-and-above' relation to the simples. Nihilists say that (T) is not literally true if we take 'table' as intending to refer to an object bearing the nothing-over-and-above

relation to the simples (because there is no such thing), but it is true in a looser, less literal sense, if 'table' just refers to the simples (cf. van Inwagen 1990, 108-11).

We can put Thomasson's stance on composite objects in slogan form as 'nihilist metaphysics with universalist truths'.[26] Why nihilist metaphysics? Because all it takes for tables to exist according to (E) is that the application-conditions for 'table' be satisfied. The application-conditions stipulate that 'table' is to be used when there are certain arrangements of simples. Nowhere in the application-conditions for 'table' is there a requirement that there be a table (an o*bject* bearing some nothing-over-and-above relation to the simples), as that would violate the deflationary character of (E). Why universalist truths? Because, since the application-conditions for 'table' are fulfilled (there actually are simples there), it follows that (T) is true – simpliciter, not in a loose or approximate sense. But note an important difference between Thomasson and the believers. For the latter, (T) is true for metaphysical reasons, i.e., because 'table' actually picks out an *object* that is a table, as opposed to an arrangement of simples. For Thomasson, (T) is true for conceptual reasons; not because 'table' refers to a table – there are only simples – but because as long as the application conditions for 'table' are met, it is impossible to coherently deny that there is a table (that would be either a false internal claim or a meaningless factual-external one).

What I want to emphasise is that (E) entails that tables just are simples. I don't mean to say that easy ontology ends up committed to the existence of simples and to the existence of a table and to an identity relation between them – that would be much more than what we can get out of (E). Easy ontology is committed to a much thinner claim: the table is the simples, *once we have*

[26] I say universalist, rather than restrictivist, because there is no reason to restrict the new terms easy ontologists can introduce to only those that refer to continuous, relatively self-contained combinations of simples, as opposed to sortals for any arbitrary combinations thereof.

assumed there are simples, in the sense that 'table' is just a label we place on particular configurations of simples according to the rules of a linguistic framework. Once we have come up with a label 'table' that consistently and systematically applies to certain combinations of simples it is meaningless, according to Carnapian deflationism, to ask whether there should be more to the existence of tables other than the fact that the label applies in such-and-such circumstances. Therefore, to state truly that there is a table is no more than to *name* certain existing simples a table.

3.3 EASY ONTOLOGY AND ABSTRACTA

(E) is supposed to give us a consistent methodology for answering all existence-questions. We have seen that easy arguments can lead to realism about objects. The more interesting question is whether they can lead to realism about abstracta.

I said earlier that we should read (E) as meaning that Fs exist if we are able to restate uncontroversial truths using 'F' according to F-framework rules without change in their truth-conditions or truth-value. Let's grant Thomasson that this is exactly what happens, i.e., when I rephrase 'There are two bagels' as 'The number of bagels is two' I do not thereby go from saying something literally true to saying something literally false.[27] If this is so, then having true mathematical statements guarantees the existence of numbers; accepting that it is true that roses are red guarantees the existence of properties; accepting that 'Snow is white' guarantees that there are propositions; and so on.

[27] I will come back to this issue in Chapter IV.

I mentioned that Thomasson insists that the entities we end up with as a result of easy inferences are not themselves 'deflated'. And yet in this section I will argue that easy ontology is fully compatible both with realism and with views traditionally thought of as anti-realist.[28]

Let me start with an example of something we intuitively want to be antirealists about. Here is a bad easy argument: [29]

(S1) I did it for his benefit.

(S2) The sake-framework has one application-rule, namely that we can restate statements of the form 'A did x for B's benefit' as 'A did x for B's sake'.

(S3) Therefore, I did it for his sake.

(S4) Therefore, there is a sake (i.e., his sake).

It would be implausible to say that this bad easy argument commits us to the existence of sakes as entities with the same ontological standing as tables or even numbers. And yet this argument has the exact same form as the easy arguments for tables and chairs presented above. (I will consider Thomasson's response to bad arguments in the next section. For now I am only using sakes as a model example of how and why we should be antirealists about alleged commitments resulting from easy arguments.)

[28] There is also a view straddling the line between realist and antirealist defended by Schiffer, who in his (1994), (1996) and (2003) has developed a form of metaontology similar to Thomasson's, which he applies to abstract objects like properties, propositions, fictional characters, or events. He likewise proposes starting from uncontroversial truths and inferring the existence of abstracta from them, but he claims that the entities we end up with are 'ontologically shallow' (1994, 304); we should treat their existence in a 'suitably deflationary, or minimalist, manner' (1994, 305). For example, propositions are 'mere shadows of sentences', 'not as ontologically and conceptually independent of us as rocks and electrons […] products of our linguistic and conceptual practices', 'mind- and language-created entities' (1996, 153). Thomasson explicitly distances her own view from his (see beginning of 3.4 for her argument).

[29] Thomasson addresses this very example (2015, 265), as a version of what she calls 'bad company objections'. Button (forthcoming) also discusses bad easy arguments including the one about sakes.

If there is anything we shouldn't be realists about, sakes are. They are purely syntactic 'entities', and intuitively designate nothing; they only occur in English for a single purpose, which to help restate the phrase 'to benefit someone'. But sakes are delivered by (E) just like numbers and properties, because 'sake'-less propositions are rephraseable using 'sake' with no change in their truth-conditional content or truth-value. The lesson this teaches us is the following. There might be two reasons why F-less uncontroversial truths are rephraseable in terms of F. One might be because the uncontroversial truths are true in virtue of some existing thing, and rephrasing them in terms of F preserves their truth-conditional content because the rephrasing does no more than name *that thing* (see: tables). Another might be that the term 'F' itself designates no entity, and is a purely superficial grammatical variation on the initial truth. Of course the truth of the statement survives in the rephrasing – not because 'F' reveals something the initial truth was committed to in the first place but because 'F' has no ontologically relevant content at all and so either using it or not using it in a statement can make no difference.

The latter option, needless to say, is very antirealist-friendly. At least one antirealist that I know of, Yablo, has argued that numbers are 'representational aids' meant to enable speakers to 'express the infinitely many [mathematical] facts […] despite the fact that what we are trying to get across has nothing to do with numbers'; he later adds that 'functioning in this way as a representational aid' is not 'a privilege reserved to existing things' (2005, 94-5).[30] This sounds very much like saying numbers are syntactic concoctions like sakes, made up for grammatical convenience. (Yablo has a longer story to tell about how number-talk is metaphorical – more on which later.) Similarly, we can think that the concept 'property' is equally empty for predicate nominalists. In Quine's classic formulation: 'the word "red" or "red object" is true of each of

[30] I will say more on fictionalism in the next chapter.

sundry individual entities which are red houses, red roses, red sunsets; but there is not, in addition, any entity whatever, individual or otherwise, which is named by the word "redness"… That the houses and roses and sunsets are all of them red may be taken as ultimate and irreducible' (1948/1951, 10).[31] Of course we can introduce the word 'property' to enable us to express collectively some of these truths – e.g., 'roses are red and blood is red' = 'roses and blood share a property'. But, the nominalist would say, we should be under no illusions that the latter does more than repeat in abbreviated form using a noun what the former said using two tokens of an adjective.

In short, (E) might give us abstracta via easy arguments, but it does not tell us whether said abstracta are more like tables or more like sakes (which (E) also gives us, and which we should be antirealists about). So (E) is compatible with antirealism about the very entities it is supposed to attribute existence to.

The obvious answer here is that this is *exactly* the kind of deflationist discovery we were looking for. If easy ontology, a self-proclaimed realist deflationary view, entails some forms of antirealism, this doesn't show easy ontology is broken – it just shows that there was no conflict between realism and antirealism all along. Still, this response cannot defend Thomasson's brand of realism. The varieties of antirealism about Fs I described in the previous paragraph, the ones who would treat Fs like sakes, would say that there is nothing more to there being an F than there being true F-propositions. But Thomasson clearly wants something more: she does not require of Fs to have any particular substantive properties (causal potency, mind-independence etc.), but she still writes as if when F exists there is an *it* there that the propositions are true *of*, as opposed to just propositions.

[31] For some classic statements of predicate nominalism see Quine (1947) and Devitt (1980).

So we can now see that saying that application-conditions for abstract sortals are satisfied (where satisfaction of application-conditions is formulated in terms of propositions) does not secure the brand of realism about abstracta that Thomasson wants. For that matter, easy ontology does not strictly speaking secure realism even about concreta; the only reason we can be realists about tables is because the table argument reveals that 'table' is just a label for simples – but we did not get to be realists about simples thanks to (E); we just assumed that simples exist prior to applying (E), and table-realism is parasitic on that assumption.

3.4 LOOSENING THE REQUIREMENTS: INCLUSIVE REALISM

The response above might not work in favour of the realism Thomasson wants, but it might work for a more inclusive kind – one which genuinely holds that there is nothing more to there being Fs than there being F-truths. In fact, perhaps Thomasson herself could adopt this view. (If , like in the case of tables, these F-truths happen to have truthmakers that exist in a more 'substantive' sense, i.e., there is more to them than just the existence of true propositions, that could be seen as a bonus feature that the existing object has, not a requirement for it to count as existing.) If there are nominalists who believe the same, so much the better for everyone: that shows inclusive realism to be truly successful in showing that (some) debates were not based on genuine disagreement, which is the aim of deflationary metaontology.

The problem, however, is that this form of realism is *too* inclusive because if all there is to F's existence is that there are certain truths, then sakes pass the existence test easily. Thomasson has in fact considered the possibility that (E) might deliver less-than-fully-real entities; more precisely, she has argued against Schiffer, who discriminates between 'deep' entities like trees and volcanoes and 'shallow', pleonastic ones like properties, that we get out of easy arguments (2003,

55). She takes him to mean that it is because we are able to get the latter out of easy arguments they have to be somehow 'lesser'. Her response could also be used against sakes; it is based on a companions-in-guilt kind of strategy (Thomasson 2015, 147-8). She argues that we can also get 'deep' entities like tables out of easy arguments (see 3.1), and clearly this does not make tables 'shallow' or 'deflated'. Therefore, just because we also get numbers (or, I might add, sakes) it does not mean that they are 'less real' than tables. But, as I hope section 3.2 has made clear, the only reason why tables are not deflated is because we have started with the assumption that *there exist* simples, and with a framework according to which 'table' is merely a label we attach to configurations of these simples. This is clearly not what happens in easy arguments concerning abstracta; not only do we need not start with any assumptions regarding what exists when we start thinking about numbers, but it would be misguided to think of 'number' or 'property' as labels for pre-existing stuff in the same way as 'table' is.

Can one object that 'there are sakes' is meaningless in English rather than false, and argue that genuine easy arguments should have meaningful conclusions? But the question here is, if it is meaningless, why is that? Easy arguments are supposed to consist in a series of meaning- and truth-preserving inferences; the 'sake' easy argument is identical in its structure to any other easy argument. So if the conclusion of (S1)-(S4) is meaningless, it must be a problem not with the form of the argument but with the application-conditions for 'sake' – something like the fact that they prescribe that 'sake' can only be used in a noun phrase ('for X's sake') rather than as a grammatical subject. But at a closer look this won't work. English syntax definitely allows me to say 'It was his sake that I did it for' where 'sake' is a grammatical subject – and this is meaningful. Likewise, English syntax also allows me to say 'There is a sake'. Granted, this sounds strange, but why would it be meaningless? I see no reasons related to the bare grammatical rules of English why it should

be; the only explanation available is that 'sake' simply does not designate something that exists. But that is just what the meaninglessness argument was trying to show.

A much better response would be to add some further criterion to (E) so as to restrict the kinds of entities it might deliver. Needless to say, this 'something' cannot make any use to a notion of 'thinghood' or 'existence' prior to (E) itself, lest the inclusive realist lose her Carnapian credentials. Of course what she wants to say is that numbers exist and sakes don't, but she cannot incorporate this directly into (E).

One solution is to appeal to *coapplication-conditions*. Coapplication-conditions are 'conditions determining when the term may be reapplied in a way that will entitle us to say it's applied "to one and the same [F]"—thus establishing identity conditions for [F]s (if any there be)' (Thomasson 2015, 223). For something to qualify as a sortal, it ought to have sufficient coapplication-conditions (2015, 264). But the term 'sake' is not associated with any co-application conditions, so it is not a genuine sortal.[32]

I don't think this response works. Coapplication-conditions are supposed to tell us when if at all two Fs are identical; or when a concept applies *to the same thing* on different occasions. How to make sense of this? It seems to me there are only two options. One is that coapplication-conditions can only come into effect once the existence of F is taken for granted; we can only say that this F is identical to that F if there is a thing which is F on both occasions.[33] If this is the case Carnapians cannot use coapplication-conditions in formulating (E) or indeed in counting something as a sortal or not, since (E) must not make reference to existence. If sakes have no

[32] Cf. Button (forthcoming): 'When asking for the meaning of a phrase, we should neither consider it in isolation, nor merely in the context of an individual sentence; rather, we must consider it in the context of an entire practice'. There is no practice associated with 'sake' – its use is confined to a single noun phrase.
[33] This is what Evnine (2016, 159-61) seems to suggest.

coapplication-conditions, too bad for them, but they still exist according to (E), which in turn reflects badly on inclusive realism. If on the other hand coapplication-conditions do not require that something exist first in order to apply[34] but are simply constitutive rules of use for sortals, I can see no principled distinction between them and application-conditions; coapplication-conditions are *just more* application-conditions. And if we can cook up one application-condition for 'sake', i.e., that there is a sake whenever something is being done for some person's interest, what stops us from cooking up more of them? Nothing, I think.[35] Moreover, intuitively it seems that if we want there to be a difference between sakes and numbers, cashing in out in terms of the amount of rules of use they have (sakes have only one, numbers have many including coapplication-conditions) is the wrong way to go about it; surely they must differ in kind.

[34] This is what Thomasson (2015, 224-5) suggests in response to Evnine's objection.

[35] Thomasson (2015, 265 fn.8) that if we add sufficiently many co-application-conditions for 'sake' she is ready to accept sakes in her ontology. I cannot address this in detail, but I feel that there are two options: either the new application-conditions will be highly arbitrary, giving us a very gerrymandered 'object', or they won't, in which case they will just end up latching onto the application-conditions of some less controversial putative entity – e.g., 'sake' might end up as just meaning the same as (say) 'advantage'. Either way, the main problem is that easy ontology entails realism about sakes as they currently come, with their lone application-condition.

4 CHAPTER IV: TOWARDS A MODEST DEFLATIONISM

4.1 RECAP AND THE WAY FORWARD

In Chapter II I argued that we can reformulate ontological questions, of the sort Carnap thinks are external, as questions internal to the framework of all things. That is,

(C1) Are there Fs?

can be reformulated as

(C2) Of all things that exist, are there any that satisfy the application-conditions for 'F'?

It is important to get clear on the issue. If (C2) and other questions like it are indeed meaningless, it does seem like we should be realists about everything that our linguistic frameworks include. (C2) trades on a gap between

(i) the application-conditions for 'F' being met; and

(ii) there being Fs.

If there is no such gap, then the satisfaction of application-conditions for any term guarantees that there is something designated by that term.

In Chapter III I argued that this leads to what I called 'inclusive realism'. There are problems with this view. One is that it over-commits us. Another is that it feels a bit like cheating: eliminating the requirement that the application-conditions for 'F' be met by some*thing* that is F solves disputes about existence by simply declaring that everything exists. Moreover, if anything

it only really solves disputes between realists and some kinds of antirealists; it does not engage at all, indeed it completely ignores, the kind of antirealism that accepts the gap between (i) and (ii), since the very starting point of Carnap's and Thomasson's deflationism is the denial of the gap. And if this kind of antirealism is a possibility, then hard ontology is on the table, because then the existence of Fs won't simply fall out of some F-framework.

In chapter II I said that Thomasson, following Carnap, just assumes that there is no gap between (i) and (ii), which can logically only lead to inclusive realism. In this chapter I will do two things. In the first half I will defend the meaningfulness of ontological questions, and in the second half I will propose an alternative, weaker way to deflate ontological disputes, that is not based on the meaninglessness/unaskability of ontological questions like (C2) – contra Carnap and Thomasson – but on their unanswerability.

4.2 IN DEFENSE OF 'THINGS'

What underlies both the possibility of genuine antirealism (i.e., of the sort that doesn't just turn out to be inclusive realism) and with it of hard ontology is our ability to meaningfully ask the following question (let's focus on numbers):

> (N1) Of all the things that exist, are there any that satisfy the application-conditions for 'number', i.e., such that the truths stateable using number-talk are about *those things*?[36]

The meaningfulness of (N1) requires that the following be both meaningful and true:

[36] I use 'thing' and 'object' interchangeably; I use 'object' more in this section for consistency with Thomasson's and Korman's terminology.

(N2) It is possible that the application-conditions for 'number' be satisfied without there being an object such that *it* is a number.

Thomasson believes we can make no sense of statements like (N2), however. She argues that there are only two ways to understand 'object', neither of which will make (N2) meaningful and true (Thomasson 2015, 10-11). One is the 'covering sense', 'C-object', which has no meaning of its own, but 'serves as a dummy sortal […] the rules of use for which entitle us to infer "there is some [object] … from "there is some S", where "S" is any first-order sortal' (2015, 109). For instance, it is in this sense that we use 'object' when we infer 'there is some object in the kitchen' from 'there is a table in the kitchen'. This is clearly not what we mean in (N2), because we don't want to use 'object' in a purely inferential sense that depends for its application-conditions on another sortal, especially not if that sortal is 'number', since that would make (N2) trivially false ('It is possible that the application-conditions for 'number' be satisfied without there being a number'). Second, we can use 'object' with a different sense, 'S-object' – 'sortal term, typically used to track medium-sized, unified, bounded, and independently mobile lumps of stuff' (2015, 196). In this case, (N3) would be clearly false, since no one would expect numbers to be medium-sized dry goods; they are abstract objects, not lumps of stuff.

I can grant that Thomasson is right that there are no other readings of 'object' in such a way that they would have fully determinate application-conditions. But it would be a mistake to assume that if we don't have fully specified application-conditions for some sortal then any questions in which it appears must be meaningless. Even if we accept I/E, all we are entitled to make is a weaker claim: if we don't have *any* application-conditions *at all* then the questions using that sortal are meaningless (see: huasadoes). And, in light of this, I want to propose, first, that there is a perfectly good starting-point for making sense of 'object' above: to say that numbers are

objects is just to say that there is more to them than just the satisfaction of the application-conditions for 'number' by certain true propositions. And there is further sense to be made of U-objects. I will present two arguments in support of this.

First, consider the following sentence, which seems both meaningful and true:[37]

(S) Some objects exist without there being sortals/application-conditions/linguistic frameworks for them.

That should be true for the inclusive realist. After all, she believes that all it takes for numbers to exist is that there be true mathematical propositions, for properties that there be true 'x is thus-and-so' propositions, and so on – but suppose we would have never introduced the terms 'number' and 'property' in our language. Then (S) as stated by a speaker of that language would be true by the inclusive realist's own lights because the relevant propositions would still exist.

Or, to go through a different route: (S1) below is clearly meaningful (it is internal to the number-framework), and true. But intuitively it seems that (S1) entails (S), so (S) must also be meaningful and true:

(S1) There would be numbers even if we had no number-framework.

In (S), object cannot mean 'S-object'. There are, of course, middle-sized dry goods for which we have no sortals, but (S) is supposed to cover abstract objects as well. Does it mean 'C-object'? Remember that 'C-object' has no application-conditions of its own; it is a sense of 'object' that merely allows us to make inferences from 'There is an F' to 'There is something'. Now, (S) is true

[37] Example from Korman (forthcoming), except he uses it to argue against Thomasson's simple realism rather than the inclusive realism I am proposing, and so goes in a slightly different direction with it.

if (S1) is true, but the speaker uttering (S) is not inferring it from (S1), since ex hypothesi she has no number-framework. And still, it is meaningful. So, 'object' in (S) probably means 'U-object'.

We could say that we have a primitive understanding of 'U-object', and that it is based on it that we are able to raise ontological questions, or we could give priority to ontological questions and say they are meaningful and thereby argue that our understanding of U-objects is derivative from that. The second argument I will propose will provide a way to make sense of the latter option, but both are equally good for our purposes and they are not in fact mutually exclusive. In any case, quite independently of the previous argument, I want to point out that ontological questions can still arise even if we presuppose inclusive realism.

For example, consider tables again (refer back to 3.2 if needed). It is not just that 'table' application-conditions are satisfied by the existence of some true propositions; in addition, there are existing things (the simples) that make those propositions true. So there is a special relation between the simples and the application-conditions for 'table' – let's call it 'satisfaction'.[38] Given this, we can start asking ontological questions in a roundabout manner, via analogy (using variables instead of sortals so Carnapians don't complain about meaningless terms):

> (A) Is there some x such that x stands to the application-conditions of 'F' as the simples stand to the application-conditions of 'table'?

And this is a perfectly meaningful question, which we can give definite answers to on many occasions. If we ask it with respect to other material objects the answer will usually be 'yes'. If we ask it with respect to other allegedly existing things, like sakes, the answer will always be 'no'.

[38] I want to highlight this is not a mereological question because it doesn't concern the relation between two things. The issue isn't that the simples stand in some composition or constitution relation to an object, i.e., the table. I am talking about a relation between a term, 'table', and the simples. The simples are what the term applies to.

We know there is nothing that stands to 'sake' as simples stand to 'table' according to the very rules of use for 'sake' all it takes for sakes to exist is that we can rephrase 'for X's benefit' by saying 'for X's sake'. That one application-condition makes all the difference between 'sake' applying and not applying. There is nothing more.

But, surely, if we are able to answer (A) with a definite 'yes' sometimes and with a definite 'no' some other times, it must be a meaningful question. And, more importantly, it won't be meaningful (and answerable) thanks to the application-conditions of the relevant sortal, since application-conditions are formulated in terms of propositions rather than objects. In other words, what makes it meaningful isn't the sortal that we plug into the 'F' placeholder; it is its general form, as given by (A). But if this is meaningful, why should it not also be when the 'F' is a number or a property? Of course, in those cases the question won't be easily answerable, if answerable at all. But it can still be raised. However, (A)-type questions are exactly the kind of ontological questions inclusive realism was supposed to do away with – and they can be asked even when we assume that 'exists' applies to any so-called entity we could possibly think of, as long as its application-conditions are met.

And, relatedly, that's another way to get an understanding of 'U-object': some x, such that x is a satisfier of application-conditions for some sortal, where the notion of 'satisfier' is understood via analogy from instances where we know that application-conditions are satisfied by some*thing*. It true that U-object won't have fully determinate application-conditions, but it would be a mistake to assume that this means any questions it is used in would be meaningless – and indeed this is exactly what Carnap and Thomasson assume. As we have just seen, (A) above is an ontological question and is meaningful.

4.3 A LESS AMBITIOUS CARNAPIAN PROPOSAL

If my arguments in the previous section are right, ontological questions are meaningful. But this doesn't mean Carnapian deflationism is dead. The inspiration from my proposal comes from fictionalism, especially the various forms developed by Yablo (1998, 2000, 2001, 2005 and his later 2009 to some extent). His early fictionalism started by taking for granted Walton's theory of fiction as make-believe (see Walton 1990 and 1993). Roughly, Waltonian fiction is a game of make-believe played with props. Props are real-life objects that, in combination with game-specific principles of generation, yield fictional truths; e.g., in the game according to which tree stumps = bears, the presence of two tree stumps behind Timmy makes 'There are two bears behind Timmy' true in the fiction. Many make-believe games are played for the sake of the make-belief itself, but some are 'prop-oriented', in Walton's terminology. Imagine you ask me where Crotone is; I answer 'It is at the arch of the boot'.[39] What happened here is that I invited you to participate in a game of make-believe; the map of Italy is a prop, and the fictional truth is that Italy is a boot.[40] Within this game, I utter a fictional truth, something that is not literally true and that I'm not committed to – Crotone isn't literally on a boot – but is true-in-the-fiction if we assume the game's rules. I utter this in order to communicate something about the real world; i.e., that Crotone (actually!) is in the part of Italy that would look like the arch of a boot in a make-believe game where Italy is a boot. I used the 'boot' fiction as a 'representational aid' in order to communicate that literal truth.

[39] This example is from Walton (1993) and Yablo uses it in almost all of his papers on fictionalism.
[40] This is for illustration purposes and I'm not committed to the claim that this is what we actually do when we speak of Italy as a boot. Let's bear with Yablo's assumptions to understand how his fictionalism works.

Yablo believes much ontological talk serves exactly this function. Earlier I mentioned briefly numbers as representational aids. Unlike some other fictionalists, Yablo does not believe mathematical sentences are false (see, e.g., Field 1980); they are all true. However, they need not be true in virtue of any things (U-objects, to use our terminology) that make them true. We can think of our number-talk as being this kind of prop-oriented fiction – we make up a world of imaginary entities, numbers, of which we talk in order to communicate that the world is such that it makes this particular kind of fiction appropriate: 'we make as if pluralities have associated with them things called "numbers", so as to be able to express an (otherwise hard to express because) infinitely disjunctive fact about relative cardinalities like so: The numbers of Fs is divisible by the number of Gs' (Yablo 2005, 98).

I shall not address fictionalism in detail, for reasons of space, but I want to borrow its key idea. Fictionalists, like easy ontologists, admit certain uncontroversial truths: that I have ten fingers, that roses are red, that there are simples arranged tablewise… And, like easy ontologists, they believe that people state the rephrasing of these truths in terms of the disputed entities (numbers, properties and tables, respectively) in order to communicate those truths. The insight of fictionalism is that there can be ambiguity regarding what this 'in order to' means. I might state P in order to communicate Q because P and Q are analytically equivalent (that's what the realists, simple and explanatory, inclusive and non-inclusive, believe). Or I might state P in order to pragmatically convey Q, even though they don't mean the same thing. There might be no numbers, for all we know, or there might be. (Yablo, for example, does not take a stance on that.) What is important is that there are certain truths and that we are able to communicate them, whether the ontologically committed sentences through which we do this are literally true or not.

Fictionalism as such is not something I particularly want to support, since it requires making rather strong assumptions about the propositional attitudes of speakers who are involved in making ontological assertions – that they consciously pretend to be ontologically committed or at best are unaware of their commitments.[41] I also do not endorse the fictionalist claim that all we should understand linguistic frameworks as doing is 'provide a context in which we are to say -X- under these conditions, =X= under those conditions, and so on, entirely without regard to whether these statements are in a framework-independent sense true' (Yablo 1998, 98), as if they were principles of generation in a game. All I want to keep is the possibility, raised by fictionalism, that we can state uncontroversial truths by making use of some sortal 'F' that intends to refer to some F, that we can mean them, and yet that 'F' does not need to refer for the successful communication of the truth. For instance, when we say there's a table in the kitchen we are interested in communicating that some region of space is filled with solid stuff in a manner that enables us to carry out certain activities; for that it doesn't matter whether it is simples alone or an object (in the believer's sense) that do the filling. The insight of fictionalism is that agnosticism about Fs is compatible with conveying truths in F-language, and, although this is consistent with antirealism about Fs, it does not require it.

This provides us half of the motivation for deflating ontological questions. If it makes little difference whether there are Fs as long as our F-talk gets the truth across, that is one incentive to stop asking about Fs. The other half is provided by a weaker interpretation of Carnap's I/E. I have to preface it with the caveat that, for reasons of space, it is a sketch of a view to be further explored rather than a fully-developed proposal. Also bear in mind that it is not necessarily intended to be

[41] For objections to the effect that make-belief is a misdescription of people's actual attitudes and misrepresents the phenomenology of speakers see Stanley (2001).

seen as a global deflationary view, but as a policy to be adopted when debates are prolonged with no obvious progress on either side.

In Chapter II I read Carnap as stipulating that internal questions are those asked presupposing fully determinate rules of use for a term, and external ones are all the rest. I think, following my discussion, we can leave external questions the way Carnap defined them, but redefine internal ones as questions which presuppose enough rules of use for the terms in them to be meaningful. Importantly, internal questions can be meaningful even if the terms in them have *under*specified application-conditions. And, when there is a principled reason why we cannot discover more rules of use for that term so that its application-conditions become fully specified, there are two policies we can pursue. One would be to stop asking them altogether, because they cannot be answered. The other would be to stipulate more rules for the problematic terms, bearing in mind that the answers to the precisified questions will inevitably be pragmatic rather than factual. This is recognisably Carnapian, but also relatively irenic with respect to the Carnapian deflationism/Quinean hard ontology debate. Unlike a strict reading of Carnap like Thomasson's, mine doesn't propose abandoning (factual, rather than pragmatic) substantive inquiry on the grounds that the questions they ask are necessarily meaningless. I think the questions are perfectly fine to ask, but sometimes they are just unanswerable.

So, what are the principled reasons why the questions we're concerned with may be unanswerable? I think the answer lies in U-objects, again. The concept is contentful enough to be meaningful. For example, it can enable us to state (S) above and know it's true, or to parse out obvious entities like tables from obvious non-entities like sakes. Perhaps we can propose other tentative rules of use for U-object. For example, we should require most of its application-conditions to be, for lack of a better phrase, in the same ballpark. We could in principle introduce

some ‘F’ whose application-conditions range over true mathematical sentences as well as true empirical sentences about simples, a ‘mixed’ entity which is sometimes abstract and sometimes concrete. But this seems like a bad candidate for the status of ‘object’. It is not ‘natural’, in the sense in which Lewis famously used the term and which has been widely adopted by metaontologists as a criterion for settling ontological debates.[42]

We can say all this about U-objects and perhaps more – but not enough. And why is that? Consider this. First, let’s think of having a fully determinate meaning for U-object – that is, a fully determinate most inclusive linguistic framework – as having a kind of ‘checklist’ for what it takes for something to exist. We could then decide whether controversial entities exist or not by going down the checklist and seeing how many boxes they tick. The checklist items I mentioned in the previous paragraph are taken more or less by abstracting from our understanding of what we pre-theoretically and somewhat uncontroversially we take to exist. Ordinary material objects, or ourselves, provide us with some criteria for existence.

So how do we make sure we get a full checklist? One bad way to do this would be by abstracting from things known to exist. To know what it is for something to be a ‘thing’ in its most unrestricted sense, we would need to know what kinds of entities there are; to have a full list of what exists, in other words. But for this, we would need to know of particular alleged entities, like numbers and ordinary objects, whether *they* exist. And this in turn is impossible without a precise enough understanding of ‘thing’ to allow us to see whether (say) numbers have enough of what it takes for them to count as things. And so on – vicious circle.

[42] See Lewis (1983). See Sider (2009, §7) for a discussion of naturalness.

Moreover, even if there were absolutely uncontroversial entities to abstract from, for any feature they have, there will usually be plausible candidates for existence that are 'obnoxious' with respect to that criterion, as Yablo puts it. Causal powers? Numbers have none. Described by physics? Consciousness and moral facts seem to elude that. Mind-independence? The Sherlock Holmes stories, my anxiety over this thesis and Quine's corpus of writings would never be around had someone's psychological processes not brought them about at some point, but they are good candidates for existing things. In general, for any property P of some accepted entity, there will often be a putative entity E that does not have the feature. To reject E on the basis of P requires 'very strong premises about the sort of entity that can be known about, or that can plausibly exist; and these premises can always be exposed to ridicule by proposing the [putative entities] themselves as paradigm-case counterexamples' (Yablo 2001, 87); to reject that P is a criterion for existence requires similarly strong premises about what kind of features existing things can lack and still exist.

Another possible solution would be the more holistic way that is so common in Quinean hard ontology: formulate an overall best theory, see what it quantifies over, and become committed to that. First of all, 'best' theories are chosen on the basis of theoretical virtues (parsimony, simplicity, modesty, unification, coherence, perhaps conservativeness), but these have long been accused of not being truth-conducive, and providing us with pragmatic rather than epistemic reasons to go for one theory over the others.[43] But, leaving that aside, this approach has the same problem as the previous one, only on a larger scale. I said back in Chapter I that due to the criterion of ontological commitment, hard ontologists will be pressed to quantify over only those entities

[43] See e.g., Kriegel (2013,17-26) for recent criticism; see also Bricker (1992) and van Fraassen (1980), esp.68-9 and 87-8.

that are indispensable to explain the data. Many times this is cashed out in terms of causal contribution to the world, but not necessarily; see the Quine-Putnam indispensability argument for numbers. But indispensability itself is a tricky notion. If some entity E is indispensable for some truth T, and E is obnoxious with respect to what already exists in the best theory – and most of what are considered best theories nowadays are predominantly naturalistic – then we are again faced with a two- and sometimes even three-way choice between: (i) revising the alleged truth, either by denying it is true at all or by revising the problematically-committed parts of its content so that they can now be explained by some less controversial entity;[44] (ii) keeping the truth and the problematic entities that are explanatorily indispensable, and thereby ending up with obnoxious things in our ontology; (iii) keeping the truth and saying it doesn't need any entities to make it true (which is what we just saw Yablo doing). In most areas of philosophy where this choice is available, most of the views on each horn of the dilemma/trilemma have become increasingly well-developed and sophisticated, which makes a choice that is rather arbitrary to begin with (how to decide in a principled way whether to pick T or E?) even more difficult. Moreover, theoretical virtues, even if they are truth-conducive, will not help much, because at the level of complexity that most of these views have reach it is inevitable that each of them will do well with respect to some of these virtues and badly with respect to others, and again there is no non-arbitrary way to decide which to give up.

Of course, there is much more to be discussed here, and I have kept these arguments fairly general and abstract. Each individual ontological debate has its own peculiarities which need to be

[44] For example, if moral facts are too queer, you can either deny that moral statements (at least some of which pre-theoretical intuition takes to be objective) are true at all to avoid postulating moral facts, or claim that moral statements are true but they are not objective, which can enable you to postulate less controversial entities, like social or psychological facts, to explain them.

dealt with on a case-by-case basis. However, I think there is a good case to be made for the claim that at least sometimes there really is no principled reason to establish fully-determinate application-conditions for 'U-object'. To be clear, I am not saying that philosophers cannot make proposals for 'filling in' the underspecified application-conditions. I think that is a fruitful enterprise that can provide us with useful models or ways of seeing the world. But if I am right that we cannot discover a fully-determinate sense for 'U-objects', the results of this enterprise will be more along the lines of what Carnap counts as pragmatic, rather than factual, existence-assertions.

5 CONCLUSION

In this thesis I started by proposing a reading of Carnap's I/E distinction according to which 'internal' just means 'asked while presupposing rules of use for the relevant terms', while 'external' means 'asked without presupposing any rules of use for the terms'. I noted that Carnapians just assume ontological questions are the latter, and raised the possibility of ontological questions being askable as internal to the most inclusive framework, which makes use of the most general, unrestricted sense of 'thing' or 'object'. I then examined Thomasson's attempt to develop a global deflationary view from the assumption that all ontological questions are external in Carnap's stipulated sense, and showed that this can only lead to a very inclusive form of realism. There are good reasons to believe that ontological questions are meaningful – for one, they can arise even on Thomasson's view that has presupposed that ontological questions are external, and for another, we seem to have an intuitive, if not fully determinate, understanding of 'U-object', which makes ontological questions meaningful if asked internally. Taking inspiration from fictionalism, I proposed a modest form of deflationism based on the idea that application-conditions for 'U-object' will never be fully known, which makes at least some ontological questions unanswerable. This proposal is both 'Quinean' and 'Carnapian', insofar as it does not exclude substantive ontological inquiry as a conceptual possibility on the grounds that it is incoherent and meaningless, but at the same time it preserves the idea that some questions just cannot be answered. Sometimes, embracing agnosticism about whether there are Fs even while continuing to speak as if there are is the wisest policy.

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